# Consistent Success with the Red-vented Cockatoo

*By Rosemary Low*

On a recent sunny Sunday I was enchanted by five young cockatoos who were climbing over me, preening my hair, biting at my jacket and pulling at my camera strap. They were beautiful specimens and a credit to Ken (surname withheld for security reasons) and his wife Janet who had hand-reared them. The most remarkable aspect of these birds is not their beauty but the fact that they are a critically endangered species whose numbers in the wild and in captivity are very low.

The lovely little Red-vented or Philippine Cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*) has the dubious distinction of being one of only 14 parrots in the highest threat category. The principal reason for its decline is deforestation; 80% of the forests have been destroyed. Illegal trapping is another serious threat. The total population is hard to assess but it might number only 1,000 birds with the majority on the island of Palawan.

Captive breeding of this little cockatoo has met with limited success over the years. In Europe a studbook has been maintained for more than a decade in an attempt to maximise breeding and to enable zoos and private breeders to make up unrelated pairs. However, this has been fraught with political difficulties and most private breeders are no longer part of it.

Few breeders worldwide, whether private ones or zoos, have been consistently successful. Ken is an exception. He is a lifelong bird keeper, his interest in birds having been aroused during a childhood spent in South Africa, with all non-school time being spent in the bush. His enthusiasm for birds has never left him. In the 1950s he was breeding parakeets, such as Bourke's, and gradually progressed to the larger species. Nevertheless, he maintains a great affection for some of the smaller ones, such as lovebirds, although he no longer keeps them. In comparison, cockatoos are "hard work", he said. He has to continually think up ways of keeping these intelligent and mischievous birds occupied.

I admire him greatly for keeping one species only, for this is the way to succeed. His love for Philippine Cockatoos started in 1989 with the acquisition of a male. Females have always been extremely difficult to obtain. He knew this but he was prepared to wait. Five years later he was able to buy a female, a former pet. Two months after the male and female were introduced, they were incubating! Philippine Red-vented Cockatoos lay two or three eggs in a clutch. Ken mentioned that his wild-caught birds were single-brooded but some hand-reared females are double-brooded.

Later he was able to buy a wild-caught pair. As an endangered species, importation of wild-caught birds was not permitted, but Ken bought single birds from different sources as they became available. He had more males than females but this was a great advantage, and perhaps the key to his success. It meant that females had a choice of partners. Compatibility of male and female should never be under-estimated in breeding cockatoos and other large parrots.

Other important factors are patience on the part of the keeper and installing nest-box cameras. One pair had a total of 14 infertile eggs in previous years before producing their first fertile eggs in 2002. On the monitor located in his house Ken saw the male pick up a newly hatched chick and deposit it in the corner of the nest-box. Ken removed the chick for hand-rearing. Chicks number two and three were treated in the same way. While Janet was feeding the chicks, the male was sitting on the eggshells! Janet spoon-feeds the young from hatching to independence. Ken praised her patience and freely admitted that he could not carry out this task.

This year the male fed the chicks for two days. Again the nest-box camera enabled Ken to intervene at a moment of crisis. Ken saw the male pick up the chick and carry it up the nest-box ladder. He dashed outside and reached the aviary before the male had left the nest. The male deposited the chick on the shelf below the nest entrance and Ken was able to retrieve it uninjured!

This year he bred from both his pairs. Not only are males and females unrelated, they are from different sources to the very few other breeding pairs in the UK, making their young genetically extremely valuable. These two pairs produced eleven eggs, ten of which were fertile. From these eggs nine young were reared, six males and three

females. Six young were from one pair – an extraordinary achievement! It was not chance that produced such good results this year but a change in management. Ken's good friend Alan taught him a lot about artificial incubation. For the first four years the weight loss of eggs was controlled at 16% -- but some chicks died in the egg or had to be removed from the shell. This year the eggs in his Grumbach incubator were monitored to achieve a 15% weight loss – and every one hatched unassisted. Ken was delighted with this result and convinced of the value of weighing the eggs and monitoring them so closely. Eggs usually weigh between 18g and 20g and hatch after 26 to 28 days. With only two pairs of breeding birds, Ken was able to keep detailed records for each egg, something that is not possible in a larger collection.

Amazing as it may seem, Ken has already parted with two successful breeding pairs. He is limited for space and, I suspect, enjoys the challenging of making up new breeding pairs. Successful breeding comes about as a result of attention to detail – even if it the detail is only 1%! When Ken took me outside to his aviaries and incubation room, which adjoin the house, the same detail was evident. I was extremely impressed by his meticulously planned aviaries and inside quarters. The aviary framework is of white plastic-covered wood used with white plastic nails. This looks very neat. The aviaries are about 16ft (5m) long, very secluded with the roof partly covered. The floor consists of paving slabs.

The nest-boxes are T-shaped, with an entrance in each part of the top of the T – a wise precaution with cockatoos, in case the male becomes aggressive towards the female. This species has a bad reputation in this respect but male aggression has not been a problem with Ken's birds.

His young ones are not permitted to roost outside at night. They go inside. "Inside" is a room (built to the standard of a room in a house) that would be the envy of any parrot breeder. Running the length of the large half-depth cages (each of which leads to an outside flight), below the cages, is a sheet of plastic-covered wood. This is angled downwards with plastic guttering at the front. The food that falls through the wire floor ends up in the gutter. This is an ingenious and labour-saving idea! The plastic-covered wood is easily wiped clean. Ken actually made a mechanism whereby

the wood was flushed clean with water every hour but finally decided against using this.

The young cockatoos' food dishes contained various items of fresh food, such as orange, kiwi, tomatoes, cucumber, also digestive biscuits and Kay-tee pellets. The adult birds also receive soaked seed (soaked in water with three drops of Aviclens disinfectant), sweetcorn, peas, carrots and pomegranates and, when breeding, CeDe eggfood, and the yolk of hard-boiled egg mixed with brown bread.

Since 1994 Ken and Janet have reared 29 Philippine Cockatoos which, I would guess, is more than anyone else in Europe. Ken joked: "I don't know what I'm doing right, but it must be something!"

In my opinion, devoting time and spending hours in observation is the key to success in any form of livestock breeding and, in the case of parrots, having enough individuals of one species to permit changing partners until a compatible pair is formed. You must know your birds or animals intimately. Good feeding is the other important element in the recipe for success.

When all these elements are in play you might "break the rules". Ken said he has read a lot of incorrect statements about breeding these birds, including the minimum age at which they will breed or can be paired up. He finds that they do not breed before the ages of six or seven yet a friend bred with a three year old male with an older female. It is generally recommended, because of the scarcity of females, that they are not paired up until they are old enough to breed because of the fear that an immature female will be killed by an older male who is keen to breed. Ken has broken this "rule" – but he lives so closely with his birds that his keen observation of their behaviour would almost certainly alert him to any impending problems.

He has kept other cockatoo species but the friendly personality of the Philippine Cockatoo has captured his heart. Seldom have I seen a parrot breeder with a happier expression on his face than Ken with five young cockatoos jostling for position on his head! There can be no greater fulfilment than specialising in an endangered parrot of a species that is uncommon and seldom bred in captivity. While there is no suggestion

that captive-bred birds will ever be returned to the wild, for Ken, playing a large part in ensuring that a species survives in European aviculture is extremely satisfying.

*Conservation measures*

In 1992 Marc Boussekey from France took up the cause of this cockatoo. He persuaded a zoo in France to sponsor a poster showing the cockatoo and describing its plight in three languages. Three thousand posters were distributed throughout the Philippine Islands. The zoo also sponsored a public awareness initiative, which included a one-hour radio programme every Sunday morning. At least 130 listeners responded. This resulted in the location of more than 300 cockatoos and 30 nest sites that were previously unknown to researchers. Even former trappers co-operated. The radio programme has continued, resulting in a network of informers and protectors.

On Palawan the human population explosion has been highly detrimental to the cockatoo's survival. Nearly all nest sites are known to trappers and young are removed as soon as they are old enough. There has been a positive development in that some former trappers have been employed to guard the nests. In exchange for this service they received cash incentives, radios, rice and T-shirts. In 1997, for example, ten young fledged as a result.

In 1994 students from Palawan State University formed a movement whose name means "Save the Cockatoo". They helped to set up a protection network in five areas where the cockatoo still had viable populations. Young cockatoos hatched in protected nests are ringed with stainless steel bands bearing identification codes.

The small island of Rasa, off the coast of Palawan, is now the main focus for research. In the year 2000 fifteen nests were located and intensively monitored by wardens. Not a single instance of nest poaching was recorded. A fund-raising project was launched. Interested people "adopt" a cockatoo (make a donation) and receive information relating to a specific bird, identified by its ring. Conservation education on Rasa has been successful; in the four years up to 2002 the cockatoo population doubled from 40 to nearly 80 birds. There were then 20 nest sites, many of which have fledged three or

four young, instead of the two that are normal for this species. The eight full time wardens ensure that poaching of chicks and illegal logging do not occur.